

Deepak Chopra interviews Jalaja Bonheim

THE HUNGER FOR ECSTASY: Fulfilling the Soul's Need for Intimacy and Passion

How does spirituality relate to ecstasy?

In Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, one of God's names is *ananda*, which means ecstasy. These people understood that what we call God or Spirit is the true source of ecstasy. They also knew that this source isn't external. It's our own core, our own essential self. In other words, ecstasy isn't something you have to acquire from without. It's an inner potential you already possess. Animals and children move into ecstasy very naturally and easily. For us grown-ups, it's a little more difficult. We've got so much conditioning to undo, so much armoring to shed. Still, we all have the capacity to feel connected to the universe, to realize its perfect beauty, and to know we are infinitely loved.

What about people who don't believe in God or spirit?

Belief is not important. What matters is experience, and finding the right language to convey that experience. The word "God" is problematic for many people. You talk about God, and they immediately envision an angry old man with a long white beard. But what we're really talking about is something very immediate, very present. It's the essence within all things-trees and rocks as well as human beings. It's the soul, the mysterious ingredient that gives meaning to life. It's what connects us, like the center of a wheel where all the spokes run together. Some people find their connection with spirit in love, some find it in nature, others find it in their creative process. It's my job to find the language to communicate with each individual, so I can help them walk the path that is authentically theirs.

Is ecstasy the same thing as happiness?

No, it isn't. Happiness is a wonderful state that can serve as a launching pad to ecstasy. On the other hand, so can pain. For example, women sometimes experience states of ecstasy in the midst of terrible labor pains. Death is another gateway to ecstasy-many people experience ecstasy at the bedside of a dying person. You see, both birth and death crack open the boundaries of our lives and invite our awareness to expand beyond its usual constrictions into an unimaginably vast reality. When we allow ourselves to merge with that infinite vastness, we experience ecstasy.

In your book you talk a lot about intimacy. What is intimacy, and how does it relate to ecstasy?

The Latin word "intimus," from which we got the word intimacy, means "the innermost." So intimacy is the experience of allowing our innermost self to be touched by the world, to be moved, to be transformed. Ecstasy is the experience of total intimacy-with God, with nature, with life, with the universe-but above all, with ourselves. We can only be intimate with others to the extent that we can be intimate with ourselves. We need to be fully present to our own pain, our vulnerability and broken-heartedness, as well as our joy and our wonderful, quivering aliveness. Then, we can be equally intimate with a tree,

or a cloud, or another person. When you experience true intimacy with someone, you recognize their sacredness and their beauty. True intimacy naturally inspires respect and reverence.

What does it mean to be intimate with God?

We experience intimacy with God in two ways. On the one hand, God reveals him or herself to us through the world, which is God's body. So in this sense, intimacy with God means intimacy with the world. When you stroke your cat, you are stroking God. There's no separation. On the other hand, God also approaches us from within, as our heart's longing and as the tiny voice that whispers to the soul. Mystics like to think of God as their lover. When you imagine God being your lover, you get a sense of how intimate that relationship could be. It's exciting, it's erotic, it crackles with electricity. We need to bring that erotic juice back into our spirituality.

Whereas many religious teachings advise us to transcend desire, your book celebrates desire as a spiritual teacher. How do you see the role of desire on the spiritual path?

All desire is ultimately the desire for happiness, bliss, and ecstasy. All desire is the desire to experience that rapture which the mystics speak of as sacred union, or the divine marriage. However, we all get caught up in some form of illusion. We think a particular man or woman will give us the bliss we seek-or maybe it's money, or success, or a drug. Traditional religion often condemns this type of "worldly" desires. They say, don't waste your time, go straight to God. I say that our quest for love, or money, or security is not a waste of time. Rather, it's the way we learn our spiritual lessons. It's how we acquire wisdom. At the same time, can we understand that *through* the lover, or the money, we are seeking something else, something otherworldly? We're after what the Sufis call the Beloved, or the Priceless Pearl.

You say that healing our relationship to desire is a key to the survival of our species and the healing of our planet? Why is that?

Consumer society feeds only those desires that can be exploited for financial profit. It invites us to shop till we drop, and every day new credit cards arrive in the mail to egg us on. Meanwhile, the desires of the heart and the soul go unattended. Addictions and eating disorders run rampant. On the one hand we're raping the planet to satisfy our greed, on the other, we've put our hearts on a starvation diet. This is a great tragedy, and unless we begin to honor the desires of soul, it can only lead to disaster.

So there is a hierarchy of desires?

Yes, the desires of the soul should take precedence over the desires of the ego. When you lie on your deathbed, you won't care whether you drove an expensive car, or had a prestigious job. What will matter to you is whether you lived your life fully, whether you loved deeply, and whether you did what your soul came here to do. It's by listening to the desires of the soul that we find happiness and contentment. People whose first priority is their soul's happiness make very different choices than those who have make success, or wealth, or security their priority. We need to seriously contemplate the

question, "What do I really want? What really makes me happy?" It's a seemingly simple question that can take us very deep.

How do you see the connection between addiction and ecstasy?

Addiction is one of the most common symptoms of ecstasy deprivation. Kids have a ravenous appetite for ecstasy, and they'll try to satisfy their hunger any way they can. As long as we don't show kids healthy ways of accessing spirit, they're bound to reach for drugs. None of our drug prevention programs are working, because we're not addressing the real problem, which is that kids are starved for soul nourishment and for ecstasy. Drugs and alcohol are obvious addictions, but you can also be addicted to shopping, working, food, or exercising. All such addictions represent misguided attempts to satisfy the soul's hunger.

Many people, when they hear the word ecstasy, immediately think of sex.

The pathways to ecstasy are infinite. Sex is of course one way—a very beautiful one—but you could also experience ecstasy while dancing, or writing poetry, or climbing a mountain. In our society, we tend to believe that sex and romance are the only sources of ecstasy. We idealize romance while neglecting other sources of ecstatic experience, such as community celebrations and rituals, spiritual practice, communion with nature, and immersion in silence.

Why do you describe shame as the arch-enemy of ecstasy?

As I said before, ecstasy is an experience of radical intimacy. Shame makes us feel unworthy of being loved in an intimate way. We feel we should hide and not let people see or touch us in certain places, physically or emotionally. I work primarily with women, and unfortunately, women in our society suffer from a terrible epidemic of shame. Whether it's physical, sexual, or emotional shame, it all boils down to a deep-seated belief that we are somehow not good enough. This is the sad legacy of a predominately Christian culture that, for many centuries, has taught that the body was sinful, sex was sinful, and women were sinful. So we have a lot of healing work to do in this area.

Is shedding shame central to the experience of ecstatic sexuality?

Absolutely. The foundation of ecstatic sexuality is self-love. You must learn to love yourself completely, body and soul. Only then can you surrender fully to the flow of sexual energy throughout your body, and only then will you choose appropriate partners to share your love with. Unfortunately, our culture doesn't teach us to honor our sexual energy. Part of what we do in my workshops is heal the wounds caused by negative sexual experiences and conditioning, so that we can accept ourselves as the sexual beings we are, without guilt or shame. We need to restore our sense of reverence for all expressions of the life force including sexuality.

You emphasize the need for discipline on the path of ecstasy. Why is discipline important?

Consider the way a potter centers his clay on the wheel. If he's a beginner, and the clay isn't perfectly centered, it will begin to wobble and the walls of his pot will break. Whereas a skilled potter can make a very large vessel with delicate, thin walls, because

he's mastered the discipline of centering. Human beings are vessels too-vessels of spirit. Spiritual discipline teaches us to be perfectly centered. Then, you can expand into the infinite, and you can taste the ecstasy of your own primordial vastness. Without discipline, you might get little glimpses of ecstasy here and there, but you can't sustain it.

What are your favorite disciplines?

Meditation is definitely a favorite. I cannot imagine a life without meditation, without some regular practice of quieting my mind. For me, the practice of what I call "right speed" is also very important. Right speed means that I don't rush or hurry, that I respect the rhythms of nature and of my own body, that I don't allow myself to be swept away by the frenetic pace our society considers normal.

You speak of the need to develop new forms of communal spiritual practice. Why is that important?

Group energy is extremely powerful. People want to feel that power; that's why they go to ball games and rock concerts. When you channel that immense energy towards healing our souls, healing our communities, and healing our planet, miracles can and do happen.

What forms of communal spiritual practice do you recommend?

I have been practicing what I call Circlework™ for over twenty years. In brief, you might define Circlework™ as the art of leading a circle of people into sacred time and sacred space. An important aspect of the process is meditation on the center of the circle as the symbol of our universal source. The beauty of Circlework™ is that it transcends all religious barriers and unites people in a space where they can experience the ecstasy of shared spiritual communion. Of course, people have always gathered in circles for celebration, prayer, ritual, and healing, but the old ways won't work for us. Circlework™ integrates the insights of Western psychology with the ancient wisdom of the East into a new form that addresses our current needs as we move into the third millennium.

Most of your workshops are primarily for women only. Why is that?

Most women in our culture have never experienced the sacred feminine. They aren't really sure what it means to be a woman. In a good women's circle, women bathe in the sacred feminine. They steep in it, until it permeates their every cell and they truly understand the feminine spirit-not just in theory, but in a felt, embodied way. This is an experience all women in indigenous cultured have from a young age. In our society, we don't, and this lack of same-sex community creates problems in our relationships. How can you meet the opposite gender from a place of strength if you don't know your own? To embody the fullness of the sacred feminine in the world, you need to be anchored in the sisterhood of all women. The same applies to men, as well. Men need to experience the sacred masculine.

You studied classical Indian dance for many years. How did that experience influence your work?

Dance and movement are such powerful tools for awakening, yet many people are so

afraid of dancing, so afraid of appearing foolish or awkward. In my workshops, I create a very safe, non-judgmental space that allows people to really experience the joy of movement. Our bodies are very wise. They hunger for ecstasy, and know the way to get there. The challenge is to get the mind to step aside and stop controlling the body. When you set the body free, the divinity that resides within can be expressed. This is what Indian temple dance is all about. You don't just dance the stories of the gods and goddesses, you *become* them. It's a path of embodiment.

What other tools do you use in your circles besides dancing?

People need to know that they can access their inner teacher, their inner source or wisdom and guidance, so they don't remain dependent on outer teachers. To this end, I use meditative writing practices that cultivate people's capacity to listen deeply into themselves, and hear the voice of their soul. There's always a lot of deep personal sharing, chanting, ritual, meditation, immersion in silence. Each group is different, and I try to meet the needs of the people who come.

What are three pieces of advice you would give to someone in search of ecstasy?

First, find out what you love most in the world, and make it a priority in your life. Second, breathe. Your breath is the bridge between you and spirit, and a key to ecstasy. Nourish yourself with breath-not just now and then, but always. Third, find a community of people who share your hunger for ecstasy and support your soul work. Don't try to do it alone; it doesn't work.